

Romancing the Labor

by

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This is a report of a creative body of work dealing with the adaptation of traditional industrial processes into contemporary sculpture. This thesis shows that admiration for labor is still present in sculpture by utilizing the techniques and language of industry for an aesthetic purpose. My work deals with these processes as an act of emulation and reverence to our industrial past. The objects demonstrate my respect and appreciation towards industry and labor, along with the beauty I find in the machinery, material, and processes. Through the adaptation of industrial processes I am able to re-envision turn of the century labor processes and reinforce an admiration for the work of the hands-on-laborer.

Romancing the Labor

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Masters of Fine Art

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INTRODUCTION

My sculptures deal with the duality of handcrafted works of art and industrial practice, focusing on the detritus of contemporary labor practice. This theme is explored through four different approaches; large scale outdoor works, cast iron sculptures, cast aluminum materials and tools, and an encompassing time clock performance/installation. The materials and techniques of this work are adapted from industry, such as metal casting, pattern making, and resin bonded sand mold making. I use these practices to create sculptures that echo the objects of industry. These techniques and materials are the inspiration for the work and equally important, the means of creating it. The imagery for the sculptures comes from exploration into these processes and their former use in industry along with the objects utilized by the laborer. The work celebrates the labor-intensive process while also standing at odds with modern industrial society with its non-functional relevance. From this standpoint, the work becomes a monument for the alienated underclass, whether they are factory workers or the “unskilled laborer.” Sculptures are created that reference an unidentified function. Through the manipulation of material, size, and structure I subvert the intended existence of the objects from one of utility to that of cultural signifier. The work is a celebration of technical skill. It is a glimpse into the mystery and misery of industry lost as seen in abandoned factories full of machines whose purpose have been lost to time. The sculpture stands as a much-needed recognition to the forgotten and un-appreciated.

Sculpture provides the viewer a physical, emotional, and cerebral experience. The physical presence of the work grants immediate conversational development between art and viewer. The objects become specific points in our world and memory, trumping mere abstract concept. Works made in traditional permanent materials such as stone or metal last for a prolonged time. These traditional materials withstand not only time but also weather which allows them to be placed in public locations where every segment of the public can view and interact with the work. It is for these reasons, along with the technical skill and craft utilized in the making, that I choose to express my visions in the 3-dimensional field of art.

As a sculptor it is of the utmost importance for me to remain a documented representative of the labor work force as a hands-on-worker. I achieve this through the act of punching in on an official time clock such as that found on the jobs of the laborer. This documents me as a worker while also serving as a reminder of the work that has been, and will be done by the people who traditionally use them. I feel a duty to maintain the respect for the handcrafted works of skilled laborers. This notion was passed down to me from a family of industrial laborers, along with a deep-rooted need to continue the trade skills I have learned. It is for these reasons that I utilize processes and materials that are based in industry.

This body of work is a way for me to preserve the traditional activities of industrial processes through their adaptation into sculpture making. With the use of hands-on manipulation, and the knowledge passed on by skilled craftsman, I bring the traditional processes back into the world of art where it they have been lost. I show the artist as a skilled laborer and emphasize the connection between the hand and the mind.

PERSONAL HISTORY

I was born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio, a great industrial city. For many decades Cleveland and its inhabitants were known for the making of iron and steel products. This city, born out of hard working jobs and even harder working individuals, was known for being a blue-collar metropolis. It is here, amongst the callused hands and rust stained clothes of men and women, that I began my exploration into the technically skilled world of hands on material manipulation.

I have been honored through my life to be surrounded by people who understand the value of their skills as laborers. Many members of my family held important blue collar and industrial jobs, some were janitors, maintenance men, foundry floor workers, others held more skilled positions such as electricians, plumbers, HVAC specialists, carpenters, and mechanics I have always had a close relationship to the working mans world. From them, and the upbringing they gave, I received my first tutelage into the relationship between the hand and the mind. What these individuals saw themselves doing was passing on a skill, a skill that could be used later in life to save money in service bills or to help me get a job when I would one day join them in the field. What was really igniting in me though, was a passion for creation and a desire to carry on the skills I was learning.

Often times I would find myself amazed that my friends could not handle the simplest of tools. I quickly realized the importance and endangered status of the skills I had been taught. As a child I remember spending many happy nights in my fathers shop playing with tools and discovering the many uses and possibilities they held. I did not learn how to tie a necktie until I was in high school, but I could name all the tools from my dad's many toolboxes and describe their uses. It is for this reason that when I got to high school and could choose my own classes, I choose trade classes. Through my high school career I took classes in welding, automotive mechanics, and small engine repair, all while working as a general maintenance man in large apartment complexes. This only fueled my desire to learn and utilized hands-on techniques and processes.

Close to graduation, my welding teacher Mr. Smith suggested that I join the military and attend college through an ROTC scholarship where I could pursue a degree in mechanical engineering. This was my way to maintain the hands-on skills I had been given, while at the same time avoiding the burden of a blue collar paycheck. Due to un-lucky circumstances, I found myself unable to join the military. As an alternative, I became a college student with no idea what to do. As only the second person in my family to attend college I did not know how to navigate the labyrinth of academia. I frequently considered dropping out to be a full time blue-collar laborer. After many failed classes and much wasted time, I discovered the art program and more importantly the Sculpture department. It was here that I realized an outlet for my creativity and technical skills. Within that program I discovered I could still respect, honor, and carry on a connection between my hands and my mind.

PROCESS

My introduction into the world of iron casting was a huge catalyst in my desire to be more involved in an industrial process. This love of iron as an art material led me to the National Conference on Cast Iron at SLOSS furnaces in Birmingham, AL. It was there at SLOSS that I found myself immersed into the culture of iron art and industrial metal casting, surrounded by like-minded individuals who shared my admiration for the material. These individuals ranged from professionals to first timers, I was equally inspired by all of them; artists who had been producing iron art since its beginnings, those who were attempting to innovate the processes to fit modern times, and those who were fresh and full of new and grand ideas. This community of fellow artists inspires me with a continuous stream of idea generation and creative interaction.

Since my introduction into iron casting I have expanded my knowledge of the historical processes and uses of metal casting. This exploration led me to realize the importance of all the technical aspects of metal casting not just the casting but also the preceding steps. These steps include drafting, pattern making, mold making, clean up, and assembly. By using this knowledge I am keeping the tradition of industrial craft alive. The objects that are created from these processes become sculptures. The sculptures existence is determined by and dependent upon the processes that lead to its creation. In this way I celebrate and honor the skill and labor invested in the art.

Replicating the processes used in industry I find myself being challenged by the same technical issues that are faced by those in the field. I must design the forms so they will not break or hinder the final construction and design patterns to be easily created with the tools and techniques at my disposal. The molds must be made to use the least amount of material to save cost while also yielding the best results. I have to pre-plan the gating systems (the entry and distribution paths for metal to fill the mold) to fully and completely cast all the pieces while also leaving the smallest amount of clean up needed. Issues of stability, structural integrity, and safety have arisen as the objects have become more complex. This has lead me to allow the aesthetic of the work to be dictated by the realities of the material, such as the need for larger footprints to give adequate stability to the sculpture while still maintaining a similar look throughout the series.

INFLUENCES

My influences for art rest strongly in my personal past. My general daily interests and hobbies have grown to mimic the practices of the makers and fellow labor-based artists.

Recently mainstream media has begun to represent labor in a new and inspiring light. It is within these outlets that I found many influences. Videos and images of industrial processes are a constant stimulation for my creative activity. I find myself observing processes I do not know along with those that are unrepeatable outside of industry for educational purposes. These are catalysts for making works in an attempt to recreate and understand the things I have seen.

As much as these outside forces act as inspiration for me, the actual artifacts of industry are the strongest influences. I times find myself at scrap yards staring at a discarded rusty piece of industrial equipment wondering how it was made and to what end it was used. I try to map out the molding of that object and think about the people who contributed to its production. This same thought process is applied to the welds I see around me everyday, the construction methods of buildings I am in, and the inner workings of tools I own. I am forever looking at the hand built world around me to better my understanding of the processes while at the same time remembering my station within it and determining my contributions.

Individuals who work in the fields of hands-on creation whether they are artists performing new techniques/demonstrating highly successful processes or laborers mastering the skills needed to fulfill the duties of their job, are endlessly inspiring to me. No matter how good someone is at a skill or technique, there is always someone better. This idea drives me to better myself in the technical craft. Within this endless cycle of improvement creativity develops and grows.

THE ART WORK

This body of work takes various approaches to dealing with the physical and conceptual aspects of the theme. There is a main encompassing idea symbolized by the time clock, followed by three bodies of sculptural work: large scale (outdoor public) sculptural interpretations of objects used in industry, cast iron sculptures of imagined machinery, and aluminum casts of materials and tools found throughout the process of traditional sculpture making.

Time Clock

Time clocks are a common feature of factories, foundries and labor-intensive industries throughout the world. The act of punching in and punching out is one of extreme importance in these working environments. Those who use them see time clocks as a means of determining how much they get paid, but beneath this intended function is an ideology of great conceptual depth, which I explore as labor artist. Workers punching in everyday see the clock as a means of accurately determining the money they make. Management sees this same act as a way to keep tabs on the workers making sure they are in everyday. As an artist, the ever-present eye of management and the stipulations of an hourly pay rate do not bind me to a time clock. I want to focus attention on the time clock's relationship between the individual and the work being done. I use the time clock in a performance aspect to show a relationship between industry and art. This action becomes a ritualistic event, reminding me of the vast amounts of work needed to make art. This act leaves behind a relic in the punch cards and the numbers stamped upon them. This relic becomes a historical account, a document that embodies and brings to light the work that was done. This is a way of showing that the artist must work like the laborer.

I intend to continue to use the time clock in this manner as part of my daily ritual. It is my way of remembering the importance of the people who have used/currently use/and will use the objects I depict in my artwork along with the importance of the work they do. The time clock serves at least three functions in my work about art and labor; it is the means of documenting my studio work time and as such is a time-based work of art itself, it is both metaphor and inspiration as a physical object that represents the concept and it is central to the participatory performance that will take place at the exhibition.

Large Scale Outdoor Sculpture

Large-scale sculpture grants me access to the outdoor public arena. This allows for a broad range of viewers, from art enthusiasts and collectors to the everyday passer by. This brings the work and the message or significant meaning it carries, to many more people than the traditional art gallery might. The audience that I wish to address with my work is not only an art appreciating one; I hope to reach the laborers. The blue-collar working class has rarely been the targeted audience of fine art. This has resulted in an overall lack of interest and participation between artist and laborer. By having the ability to place my work in a public setting I have a significantly larger chance of my work being recognized by the workingmen and women I aim to impress. My hope is that my sculptures can engage an individual who knows and understands the objects I am representing, allowing them to find a relationship through a shared respect and understanding.

I fabricate these objects in such a way that they are easily recognized for what they are (hammer, screw driver, fork lift, excavator) but are manipulated in some way to bring about and maintain a conversation. The scale of these objects ranges from actual size to massive.

“The Screws we Lose are the Hardest to Replace” (Fig. 1) is a sculpture in which a philips head screwdriver has been enlarged into an extraordinary object. This work is monumental in size compared to the screwdrivers it is mimicking. The shaft, handle, and screw top of this sculpture are made of cast aluminum. The aluminum shaft and head are polished to resemble the chrome finish found on screwdrivers. The handle is painted red and blue to pay homage to American made Craftsman tools while also addressing the tool as a symbol for American laborers. Balanced at the top of the sculpture is a large cast bronze machine screw. Cast bronze was chosen to indicate that it is a traditional brass screw, one not found in everyday use but in the skilled labor field (such as a carburetor adjustment screw). Bronze also is a traditional sculpture material often associated with fine art. I wanted the viewer to see the humor of the bronze being used to make a screw that is then being elevated on a screwdriver pedestal. This screw though, is a flat head screw, and thus cannot be manipulated with the philips screwdriver it is placed upon. This is a reflection of today’s society showing that we as a people

have lost our ability to fulfill the needs of a technical world. We do not have enough individuals who can properly do the high skilled jobs available.

With the sculpture "*A Carpenters Dream*" (Fig. 2) I take a simple everyday claw hammer and reconstruct it in an imposing size to draw attention to the object, while at the same time altering its traditional function. The cast aluminum hammer head is placed on a three piece articulated I-Beam handle. This gives the sculpture the appearance of being mechanized. This is significant because it is a transformation of a traditionally hand held tool into an object of industrial function. Placed in the claw end of this hammer is a dramatically oversized cast iron nail. The nail is bent from a misplaced hammer swing and thus is being removed from the ground. This damaged nail places the importance of the claw hammer, and its function of hammering nails, back into the hands of the man or woman who is needed to wield it. Without the learned skill of properly swinging a hammer, nails will often be bent. This piece can be seen as a dream creation for those who have to swing a hammer everyday, a way to ease the struggles of their job, or as a call for attention to those who wield these hammers the most and the hard work they put forth.

"*One Big Scoop*" (Fig. 3) is an interpretation of the scoop and arm from a backhoe. This piece is fabricated out of steel and painted in colors matching the industrial paints commonly found on construction equipment. The arm of the sculpture is constructed from three identical forms that bolt together and articulate. The scoop is attached at the base as if waiting to dig a hole into the ground it is placed upon. Being left as just the scoop and arm, disembodied from the vehicle portion of the machine, places it into an UN-functional state of being. This missing segment of the machine is where the operator would be, without them the scoop and arm are no longer a tool but just an object to be looked at and appreciated. Stylistically the sculpture is fabricated in a simplistic form as a reflection of children's toys like Tonka that acted as inspiration for this piece.

"*Bearing the Weight of Labor*" (Fig. 4) represents a full-scale forklift. Fabricated of welded steel, the forklift is covered with used and abandoned pallets. Thus, the forklift's function of moving pallets becomes its whole being. It is now made out of the same objects it is built to handle. This places the importance onto the pallets and not the equipment, it provides a

glimpse into the materials and processes of industry. The pallets and the steel structure are weathered like well-used and aged machinery. With an imprinted seat and cast aluminum handles for the steering mechanism custom formed to fit the users hands attention is drawn to the absence of an operator. This is reason for the humorous ‘oops’ moment it presents of being tipped over onto its own forks. Without the operator the machines intended function is lost.

Cast Iron Sculptures

Our world is littered with the remnants of industry. The series of cast iron sculptures titled “*Automatons of Industry*” (Fig. 5-7) represent industrial artifacts that might have been found in abandoned factories. These sculptures are six different assemblages of over fifty cast iron parts. The machinery of the past and the mystery they present inspired these pieces. These sculptures are my own aesthetic creations. They are not actual remnants or discarded machine parts. Lacking function and color I feel the work has a sadness to it. Cast iron has (inherent in the material) an undeniable relationship with industry. Iron was one of the first metals to be refined and used in modern casting. This led to iron used for industrial purposes, where for some time cast iron was the main material used in manufacturing.

These works hold ties to my childhood by way of my early introductions into making and metal manipulation with the classic toy Erector Sets. The sculpture pieces are designed with ‘big boy Erector Set’ in mind. The process of making these pieces is a direct technique of industry. Patterns are made, sand molds are taken, iron is cast, and then they are cleaned up and assembled. Unlike industrial products, these forms are made from patterns that are not reusable. They are waste patterns. This subverts the traditional process of mass production in favor of a one of a kind creation.

As presented here the sculptures are seen in one of many ways they can be assembled. The pieces are designed with a universal assembling system. Each unit can be connected to other units with rods and bolts. This means the sculptures have the potential to interchange and become many different forms and thus many different sculptures. This leads to the creation of not just a single finished sculpture, but a collection of parts that can be interchanged and re assembled in many ways. These individual parts are direct interpretations of industrial objects such as flywheels, gears, crane arms, structural support beams, runner mounts, hydraulics, swing arms, and brackets.

Cast Aluminum Materials and Tools

The final body of work is the cast aluminum objects. These pieces are metal castings of commonplace materials and tools found in the mold making and metal casting industry. This process re-contextualizes them into Icons through the task of the same industrial metal casting practice they honor. By being recreated in the long lasting material of aluminum these objects are elevated beyond their original state and placed into a realm of significant importance. The objects chosen for this honor are those that are seen as disposable or unimportant in the world of casting. These objects are often associated with the unskilled laborers of blue-collar society. In this way importance is given not just to the machines and materials that allow the process of industry to happen, but also to the men and women who make sure the basic functions of industry run. These persons are an integral part of the functioning of industry and are rarely given any credit. After the objects are cast in metal they are manipulated to subvert their intended function. The viewer is reminded that without the mundane objects and the individuals who use them, the job could not be completed.

The sculptures in the Mundanity series depict things that are used during the mold making process. Only those involved in the process know what role they play in the creation of the castings. These objects are also used in the act of making sculptures and thus are just as important as the sculptures themselves, for without them there would be no sculpture. Such objects as wooden pallets, bags of sand, and shop necessities are immortalized in metal as sculpture.

The wooden pallet is a commonly recognized object in all of industry; it represents the basic beginnings of material and object alike. The wooden pallet used/remade in the piece titled *“Monument to Laborious Mundanity: Wood Pallet”* (Fig. 8) represents all pallets. This pallet was de-assembled in its wooden form, molded, cast, and re-assembled in its metal form. Then, this pallet had a section polished. This polished section proves that the pallet is now made of metal. It reflects the viewer into the object allowing them to become apart of the art and casts them as a reflection of a blue collar other. Also, this polish places importance onto the object in that only important things, which are meant to be shown off or honored, have the time spent on them to be polished.

Also cast is the sculptures “*Monument to Laborious Mundanity: Silica Sand Bags*” (Fig. 9) are the sand bags that contain the sand used for mold making. These castings faithfully reproduce the texture and detail of the original paper material bags. Using the text printed on the bags as inspiration, I place raised polished lettering on the castings to inform the audience of the bags nature. Words such as Industrial Quartz, Sand Mold, and Sculpture give the viewer a glimpse into the purpose of the bags. These sculptures honor the processes of traditional sculpture making while also becoming a metaphor for the worker.

The final objects of this series are “*Monument to Laborious Mundanity: Shop Stool*” and “*Monument to Laborious Mundanity: Push Broom*.” These tools and shop furniture are found in every shop. Stools give a place to figure out a problem, to rest, and to work. They function as seats, tables, ladders, and much more; these stools truly are multi-functional tools of the shop. Push brooms, despite being looked upon as unimportant, are one of the most therapeutic and necessary tools of the shop. A ritual develops in the use of the broom to sweep up. It is the act of sweeping up at the end of the day that signifies the completion of a job. These objects represent not just the physical act of making that goes into sculpture but also the mental work. Most shop thinking is done while sitting on one of these stools contemplating the next step, or while sweeping up and reviewing the day’s events. Entire sculptures and products have been developed in the head of someone behind a push broom. Entire day’s events are played out and critically looked at for the flaws and accomplishments made in that time.

As an important aspect of my thesis exhibition, I will place my audience into a momentary job of art viewer. By having visitors to my exhibition clock in on the very time clock that I have used in my studio I will create a viewer participatory performance installation. The viewers punch in on their own time card and become a part of the work. With a stack of unused time cards placed with the clock, and its location directly in the entrance to the show, the viewer will punch in and out thus taking on the job of art participant. The repetitive clicks of the hands on this particular clock strongly remind me of the demands placed on the laborers. This sound will be ever present in the background of my show reminding the viewers of the factories and shops of workers. Along with the time clock, there is a wall installation of the time cards I have been recording my hours in the studio. By displaying these punch cards with the many times and dates stamped on them, showing the extent of work that went into the sculptures

surrounding them, I am able to draw the final correlation between artist and laborer. The artist must work, the laborer must work.

IMAGES



Figure 1: *The Screws we Lose are the Hardest to Replace*; Cast and Fabricated Aluminum, Bronze; 2012; 11'x39"x2'

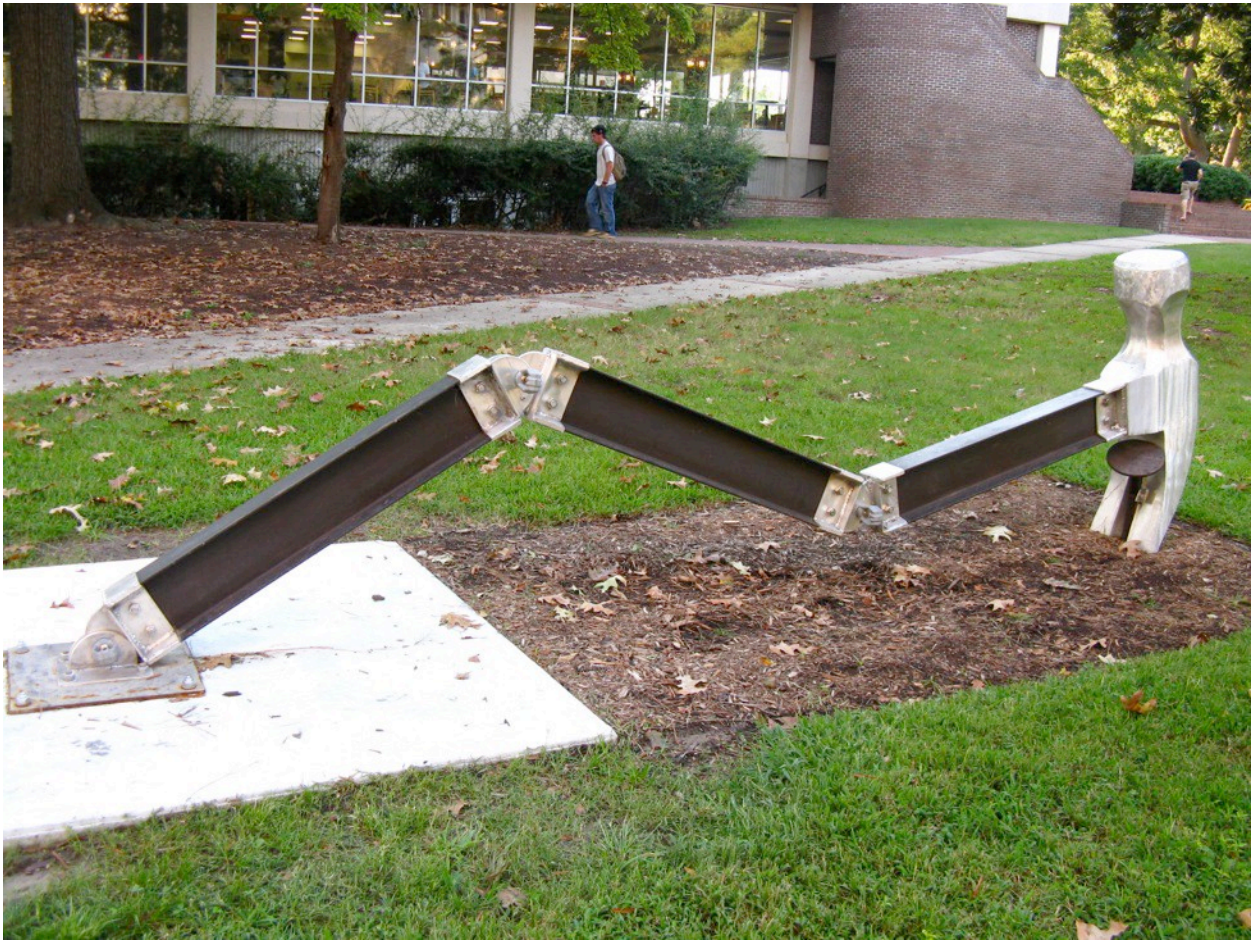


Figure 2: *A Carpenters Dream*; Aluminum, Steel; 2011; 4'x13'x17"



Figure 3: *One Big Scoop*; Steel; 2010; 11'x22"x4'



Figure 4: *Bearing the Weight of Labor*; Reclaimed Pallets, Steel, Aluminum; 2011; 10'x14'x4'



Figure 5: *Automatons of Industry- Assemblage 1*; Cast Iron; 2011; 45"x37"x3"



Figure 6: *Automatons of Industry-* Assemblage 2; Cast Iron; 2012; 52"x26"x5"



Figure 7: *Automatons of Industry-* Assemblage 3; Cast Iron; 2012; 35"x34"x7.5"



Figure 8: *Monument to Laborious Mundanity: Wood Pallet; Cast Aluminum; 2012; 39.25"x31.5"x4.75"*



Figure 9: *Monument To Laborious Mundanity: Silica Sand Bags*; 2013; Dimensions Vary

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